

Voice Elevated

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ONE OF THE SURPRISINGLY CHALLENGING ASPECTS of writing “The Independent Teacher” column is coming up with an appropriate title for each piece. Naturally, all that is required of a title is to introduce the content of what is to follow. But, knowing that readers are judicious when deciding what articles to give their time to, a clever title is an opportunity to draw in those who may otherwise be inclined to keep turning (or scrolling through) the pages.

So I can appreciate the care and attention that must go into choosing the annual theme for World Voice Day. Each theme should inspire, but it must do so within an extremely economical word count. Attempts to pare big ideas down to truncated truisms often mean some nuance, and depth will have to be forfeited. And if they are pared down too far, the audience may not have enough context for the theme to be meaningful. Just as the effectiveness of a political cartoon (or even a good meme) depends on readers having enough background to comprehend what is being satirized, the impact of each World Voice Day theme is dependent upon the connections readers make between the theme and their own experiences and understanding.

Thankfully, artists are famously well practiced at expressing big ideas in small forms. Gustav Mahler, for example, wrote the large scale “Symphony of a Thousand” for full orchestra, SATB chorus, children’s chorus, and eight vocal soloists, and it takes more than an hour to perform from start to finish. But his beloved voice and piano setting of “Liebst du um Schönheit” is only 34 measures long. Similarly, James Joyce wrote the lengthy, complex tomes *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, as well as the brief, eight-line poem “Rain has fallen.” And although Tony Award-winner Lynn Ahrens has written the lyrics for more than a dozen full musicals, she is also a success in small forms, having written the theme song for *Captain Kangaroo* and the commercial jingles, “What would you do for a Klondike Bar?” and “Bounty, the quicker picker-upper.”¹

This year’s theme for World Voice Day is a succinct, three-word call to action: “Lift Your Voice.” What readers have to decide is, why should we lift our voices and to what purpose? In a search for deeper truths, I decided to see if I could connect this short phrase to a larger idea in order to extract an intention that is personally meaningful.

Merriam-Webster is usually a good place to start for such endeavors. This dictionary provides several definitions of the verb “lift,” including “to raise from a lower to a higher position,” “to raise in rank or condition,” and “to raise in rate or amount.”² Although these definitions offer some potentially

applicable perspectives on the World Voice Day theme that are worth exploring, I was more drawn to the first synonym for “lift” that the dictionary offers: “elevate.”

When I first moved to Utah in 2006, the state Office of Tourism was preparing to unveil a new slogan. Although the popular phrase “The Greatest Snow on Earth” had been in use for decades—and even survived a lawsuit from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus—tourism officials were looking to rebrand in advance of a massive, nationwide marketing campaign.³

After entertaining hundreds of potential new slogans, they initially landed on “Seek Higher Ground.” That phrase, however, was ultimately rescinded under threat of another lawsuit over claims that it was too similar to the Colorado Ski Association’s line, “Enter a higher state.”⁴ After further deliberations, and the third choice being the proverbial charm, a new winner was selected: “Utah: Life Elevated.”⁵

The Utah governor at the time, Jon M. Huntsman, Jr., expressed his approval of the slogan, suggesting that it would help Utah and its residents to not only elevate how they see the world, but how they see themselves in it.⁶ Other Utah residents were similarly enthusiastic, commenting that the slogan is “full of inspiration and aspiration” and “the perfect tagline for the state of Utah,” since it is “simple, yet has multiple positive connotations that correspond with the state.”⁷

Others were less excited. “I, for one, am not impressed with the new slogan,” one Utah resident told the *Deseret News*. “Hard to believe that with all of the money spent in this regard, and with the tremendous resources in our state, that our tourism ‘experts’ couldn’t have come up with something better.”⁸

Regardless of the initial reactions, the slogan has stuck. In this context, “elevated” is an obvious reference to Utah’s mountainous terrain. The state’s highest point, King’s Peak in the Uinta Mountains, reaches 13,528 feet above sea level. And with a statewide mean elevation of 6,100 feet, the only states that loom higher are Colorado and Wyoming.⁹ The official “Utah: Life Elevated” logo features a font and color choice intended to evoke both granite mountains and Navajo sandstone, in order to represent the mountainous north as well as the desert, red rock landscapes of the central and southern parts of the state.¹⁰

One of the official definitions of “elevate” is “to raise the spirits of: elate.”¹¹ I can certainly attest that when I venture outdoors to spend time in the natural, wild, and wondrous vistas of my adopted home state, as I regularly do, my spirits seem to rise with each foot of elevation I gain. I always come away feeling more at peace, more connected to the world around me, and more committed to doing meaningful work with my life. In short, the elevation elates me. Thus inspired, as the World Voice Day theme encourages, I am reminded to lift my voice in ways that elevate those around me.

Pulitzer Prize winning author (and former Utah resident) Wallace Stegner once wrote, “Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed . . . We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.”¹²

We all have a voice when it comes to creating a culture and a landscape of hope, promise, and possibility. Our voices can elevate, enrapture, and exhilarate. Conversely, our voices can demoralize, dishearten, discourage, or dispirit. Just as mountains majestically rise up from the earth, this year’s World Voice Day theme prompts us to lift our voices so that we might uplift each other.

NOTES

1. Tracey Moore and Allison Bergman, *Acting the Song: Performance Skills for the Musical Theatre*, Second Edition (New York, NY: Allworth Press, 2016), 305.
2. Merriam-Webster, “Definition of Lift”; <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lift> (accessed October 26, 2021).
3. Local Lexi, “The History of ‘The Greatest Snow on Earth’,” *Ski Utah*, January 24, 2021; <https://www.skiutah.com/blog/authors/lexi/the-history-of-the-greatest-snow-on>.
4. Brice Wallace, “New Utah slogan ‘embodies heart and soul of state,’” *Deseret News*, March 11, 2006; <https://www.deseret.com/2006/3/11/19942604/new-utah-slogan-embodies-heart-and-soul-of-state>.
5. Samantha Hayes, “‘Life Elevated’ Is Utah’s New Slogan,” *KSL.com*, March 10, 2006; <https://www.ksl.com/article/174290/life-elevated-is-utahs-new-slogan>.

6. Katie Laird, "Utah Chooses New Slogan: 'Life Elevated'," *The Daily Universe*, April 6, 2006; <https://universe.byu.edu/2006/04/06/utah-chooses-new-slogan-life-elevated/>.
7. "Reactions to 'Utah: Life Elevated'," *Deseret News*, April 12, 2006; <https://www.deseret.com/2006/4/12/19947877/reactions-to-utah-life-elevated>.
8. Ibid.
9. Benjamin Elisha Sawe, "The Most Mountainous States," *WorldAtlas*, October 30, 2019; <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/us-states-with-the-highest-average-elevations.html>.
10. Utah Office of Tourism, "The Utah Brand: Life Elevated® Usage Guide"; <https://travel.utah.gov/marketing/the-utah-brand> (accessed October 26, 2021).
11. Merriam-Webster, "Definition of Elevate"; <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elevate> (accessed October 26, 2021).
12. Wallace Stegner, *Marking the Sparrow's Fall: The Making of the American West* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 112–117.

The Props assist the House
Until the House is built
And then the Props withdraw
And adequate, erect,
The House support itself
And cease to recollect
The Augur and the Carpenter —
Just such a retrospect
Hath the perfected Life —
A Past of Plank and Nail
And slowness — then the scaffolds drop
Affirming it a Soul —

"The Props assist the House,"
Emily Dickinson



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